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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development: review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups

Statement submitted by the Foundation for the Rights of the Family (PRODEFA), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Social exclusion

The disparity between the rich and the poor continues to grow. The main causes for social exclusion of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of persons usually are: poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, gender, age, disability, disease, drug and alcohol dependence, difficult or no access at all to education and culture, class, race, religion, politics.

It has been noted in various workshops on participation and social justice that participation has received far more attention in rhetoric than in reality and that few programmes or projects have made the effort to enable genuine participation or to develop the kind of knowledge, expertise and self-esteem that genuine participation can engender and which improved social integration requires.

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Families at risk

Families are the reflection of the strength and weakness of the social fabric and, as such, offer a comprehensive approach to and understanding of global problems, which they must solve, in a spirit of genuine solidarity, to the best of their capabilities.

Families at risk are those with no earner or only one earner. In some cases they have to cope with disability-related problems, migration, violence, drug-dependent members, disintegration caused by utter poverty, war or racial persecution.

Functions and social integration of the family

The family, the oldest institution in history, has long been recognized as the cornerstone, the first and natural agent, of what in the 1990s started to be known as civil society.

All over the world families are different but at the same time alike. They are essential to the future of the world because they are the cradle of the generations who will form the future of society. Indeed, the family is the primary agent for social integration. If the family failed, society would crumble.

Despite their different forms, families worldwide have common elements in their structure and functioning. There is a tendency to emphasize the transformations the family is undergoing, mainly caused by the pace of modernization, industrialization, demography and development, and to overlook what is common and remains unchanged.

The family, whatever its configuration, is always related to mutual support, love, solidarity and caring for the well-being of its members, provides an inside approach to the integration of human rights into the conduct of everyday life and is the best school for learning gender equity. This interrelationship must be clearly understood if the social role of the family is to be correctly interpreted.

International Year of the Family (1994)

1994 was proclaimed International Year of the Family on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Charter of the United Nations and four years before the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first document to recognize the family as the natural and fundamental social group.

The Year enhanced the social importance of the family and, at the same time, revealed the serious involvement and concern of the international community and the coordination of action at the grass-roots level in a unity of purpose.

It also highlighted objectives and the need for long-term action regarding family issues. Similarly, at the major United Nations conferences of the 1990s, such as the World Summit for Social Development, the family was repeatedly mentioned, particularly with regard to the need to assist families in their supporting, nurturing, educational and socializing roles, and to the means to implement that help.

One possibility, envisaged by non-governmental organizations and also by some Governments, was a declaration on the roles, rights and responsibilities of the family on the occasion of, or as a follow-up to the Year. The question of a workshop where members

of the Commission for Social Development could discuss the feasibility and modalities of a possible declaration on the family was also raised.

Such a document would fill a now existing void, because the family taken as a global entity is a frequently ignored notion. Although families are unquestionably formed by individuals, the fact that the individual is part of a family tends to be overlooked. A workshop would also provide a useful framework for exploring how to implement the mandate of various international instruments calling for Governments to protect and assist the family.

Conclusions

(a) Governments should implement the commitments taken at the World Summit for Social Development by preventing the social exclusion of the most vulnerable persons and families and by providing the support and protection they need;

(b) The family should be afforded mechanisms to participate, directly or through family associations, in decisions and processes affecting it;

(c) An effective follow-up to the International Year of the Family should seriously consider the long-term process of supporting and empowering families to fulfil their multiple functions and responsibilities and realize their rights, with policies and programmes based on a functional and global approach to families;

(d) The Commission for Social Development should project a family dimension into all developmental programmes and a family focus in its multi-year work programme;

(e) A workshop should be created within the Commission for Social Development to review and extract from national laws, international instruments and existing draft declarations relevant provisions on the family, as a basis for the articulation of a United Nations declaration on the family, a project already referred to by the General Assembly in resolution 47/237 of 20 September 1993.